

Ross Dowson speech to the Forward Forum, January 31, 1975: On Barry Lord's book "Towards a people's art" (NC Press, Toronto, 1974); a review of the book and comments on Canadian art (*from Forward, 1975*)
(Bracketed additions to text by editor, *notes in italics*.)

Introduction by Forum chairperson from the tape recording: Our speaker tonight is Ross Dowson, a long-standing leader of the Trotskyist movement. After the speaker has presented his point of view, everybody is invited to articulate their own in the discussion period.

Dowson: I feel I have to introduce myself in part because of the nature of the topic. I don't think I've spoken on art for many years – as a matter of fact it was probably one of the first things I ever spoke on. I came into the revolutionary movement after I had (begun to) resolve the problem of the relationship of art to the social question, to the socialist revolution, and I haven't had much occasion to return to the question.

However, it **is** an important question. I should say a few words about my qualifications. In the meantime, since I spoke on this topic when I was about twenty, I have read the more important books on the question. I have followed the writings on various important thinkers on political and social questions, and various books on art – not the least of which are Diego Rivera's three major works on his paintings, his theories of art and society, and also having been located in the Yonge-Cumberland area, I've kept in touch with the Isaacs Gallery and the avant-garde groupings that used to be up there.

I'd like to say a few words about the qualifications of Barry Lord, the writer of the book which I myself have been anticipating for some years; I heard that he was writing this book and been an acquaintance of his some years ago. I knew that (he was) in a formal and in an academic way, eminently qualified to write such a book. Perhaps some of you do not know him, or you only know of him in recent years, but for some years he was a – I was going to use the word such as he would use about others – that he was a "hireling" – at any rate he was in the employ of various academic circles in the art world. He was the editor of *artscanada*, and he instructed on art and related questions for some years, in various important academic milieus. Since then he's become best known as an activist in the CLM, the Canadian Liberation Movement.

I was hoping since he was taking on this field, this big question, of the history of painting in Canada, that there would be a significant contribution by a person who is involved in some aspect of the class struggle, who had an academic background, who is fully acquainted – and very few of us have had the opportunity (to know) the currents and trends and personalities in Canadian art. And so when the book came out I grasped it very rapidly and I was looking forward to this forum.

Well – I attribute the larger number of persons at our forum tonight to the interest in the

subject itself, because I assume most of you haven't read the book. It's a very big book of some 255 pages, and it has only been out for a month or two, and so I assume most of you haven't read the book – its unfortunate. I assume most of you are here because you consider art is of some importance, particularly painting – but I hope we don't remain just on the front realm of painting – the book is dealing with paintings only – only painting – I think the interest is of course because there is – undoubtedly in all of Canada – a veritable renaissance taking place in Canada in the cultural field. I think we've been witness to it in the last five-six years.

A great deal of writing is going on such has never taken place in Canada before, and a great deal of painting, and much of it is extremely stimulating – on painting. I think you could call it – well, I think it is an attempt of the Canadian people in the light of the U.S. imperialist expansion in Canada, and the developing national consciousness developing in Canada, to come to grips with ourselves, to come to grips with society as it exists in Canada. I think also there may be another aspect, the increasing interest in Marxism on every level. And of course what does Marxism have to say on this question – the question of art, and on Canadian art, concretely.

When I first glanced at the book, I was a little upset, because there are extensive sections in it that attack Trotskyism, of which I am a partisan. But early on I decided I am not going to take on the responsibility of defending Trotskyism against the attacks that Barry Lord makes, because after all it can't be the big question before Canadian art – Trotskyism. To my knowledge, there are no eminent artists who consider themselves Trotskyist in this country, and who are painting as some might assume Trotskyist would paint, and who are putting forward their views, with the prestige of being important painters and therefore embellishing Trotskyism. So I thought I won't defend (Trotskyism) and I will content ourselves with the book, with saying a few words, as Greg Curnoe says, because I assume he would be looked upon as a person who stands aside from this type of tendency struggle.

Greg Curnoe is an important artist in Canada, who is given great prominence in the book, and I think in some respects properly so, by Barry Lord, and who made a review of the book. But why focus on Barry Lord – one review is by Greg Curnoe. So he takes up this question. Because it cannot be debated. So I was going to content myself with it, but you'll see I won't – I couldn't, as I went on into the book further. At any rate...

And there are further problems when Lord tries to write about the emergence of Dadaism and Surrealism's influence in Canada. And André Breton, by implication, and Leon Trotsky are accused of opposing national liberation movements. Trotsky seems to be the *bête noir* of the latter part of this book – the whole part on contemporary Canadian art, (Lord) uses it -- Breton and the Surrealists are *allegedly* opposing nationalism in art, are opposing the tendency of various states and national academies and culture to a degree (*broken recording*) more or less, as illustrators of the national idea. Breton and Trotsky, I might add, were supporters of self-determination for both individuals and cultures, realizing we can only identify revolutionary indigenous art after it is made.

Well, he says in essence what had to be said, on this question of an attack on Trotsky – there's no foundation; he tries to make out that Trotsky was a supporter of some un-national, some de-cultured, supra-internationalist concept of art – and the record is very clear, it is

unchallengeably clear, that Trotsky's writings with Breton were related to freedom of cultural expression, and of course he did support self-determination in the colonial sectors of the world, and in the Soviet areas too, and supported self-determination of the individual in the socialist revolution in the advanced capitalist world, and there's no two ways about it; Trotsky supported self-determination no matter how you cut it. And so it just gives the lie to Lord in this field.

But I said I wasn't going to defend Trotsky, so I won't take it any further than that – I thought I would defend Marxism, Because that's really what you have to do when you deal with this book, which is presented to us in the aura of Marxism – the book does that, it presents itself as Marxist. As a matter of fact, Léandre Bergeron, who writes a parallel review with Curnoe, has a few words to say about the book from another point of view. He says "this book is revolutionary, not only because it breaks with the traditional bourgeois interpretation of the paintings, but because its analysis is a Marxist and revolutionary one." Then he adds a little separate sentence: "Art is a tool in the class struggle" – that subsidiary statement is rather interesting. But he claims its Marxist, and of course Lord presents himself as a Marxist, although he doesn't discourse on Marxism as such, he quotes Lenin in several places, and he presents the views of Mao Tse-tung who he presents as a Marxist of course – and so the book presents itself as a Marxist study.

Yes, we have to defend it – as a Marxist book. The book has been widely reviewed by some important critics. There's been a big review in *Canadian Forum*, and there's been an important review by one of the establishment in the arts world, the eminent artist, Harold Town. The fact that he is one of the establishment – and is under attack from Lord doesn't make his criticism any less interesting. It's not necessary to defend Town, but Town himself makes some telling points which I think cut across the stature of Lord and the seriousness of this book, its seriousness as a Marxist study.

He (*Town*) of course also notes the problem of Trotskyism which comes up in the book at several points. He clears Clement Greenberg, who is another one of these *bêtes noires*, an agent of American imperialism in Canadian art circles; he clears him of being a Trotskyist – he affirms he is a "Marxist" so Town differentiates Marxism from Trotskyism – however I am not going to bother to get into that aspect of the question.

But he makes some powerful points. Perhaps the most powerful one is that he accepts Lord's work as a Marxist work – that's most powerful from our point of view, because in so doing, Town denigrates Marxism. It is necessary to defend Marxism against the power of Harold Town's attack on the Lord book. Lord (*Dowson means to say Town*) accepts that it is Marxist – his criticisms, important criticisms, cannot be dismissed.

The first thing that struck me about the book was – the first page. It was quite astonishing. This book isn't the view of Barry Lord. It's much more significant than that. It's his view of course; he doesn't disassociate himself from the book. He establishes the book as having more significance than being a book of his views. As a matter of fact, we are compelled by Barry Lord to accept the book as the political viewpoint of a political movement, of a political party. And here we have the pronouncement by a political party on all kinds of aspects of Canadian art. (*Quoting from the Introduction –ed.:*) "A large number of dedicated people worked

long hours in the production of this book. Members of an Editorial Committee, supporters of and members of the Canadian Liberation Movement, particularly the National Executive of the movement, along with others concerned with the development of people's art, have given selflessly of their time and knowledge to advise on revisions of the transcript."

So, it's the political position of a political party – that somewhat overwhelms me, as a revolutionary socialist. I have never ever before seen any political party take a position on whether Harold Town is so-and-so, or whether Cornelius Kreighoff is so-and-so, or whether Jeffreys represents such-and-such a current, as an panoramic analysis of the development of Canadian art – I've never heard of a political party take a position on such a question. It seems to me to be outside the scope, and purpose, and aims of a political party.

Not, of course that I would deprive Lord of advice from anybody – it's up to him where he gets his advice – but this is presented to us as a work expounding political views of a political current in Canadian society. Trotsky had something to say about this. I just want to read it – it think it is a correct position; it adds something too because when he takes up Trotsky, he takes up Trotsky's relationship to André Breton.

Trotsky had a meeting with André Breton and Diego Rivera, in the course of which they drew up a common statement on the question of cultural freedom. It was a defence of artist in both bourgeois society, and in soviet society, and against fascism. At any rate, Trotsky says a few words about his relationship with Breton, one of the most prominent figures:

(Trotsky quoted): "A few words on Breton. I do not believe that we can demand that he make his literary magazine into a magazine of the Bloc. He represents the Surrealist school. We don't bear the slightest responsibility for him. In the domain of art, which takes precedence for him, he naturally has the most absolute right to do as he wishes. It is not for us to get involved in artistic tendencies, but to unite them as they are, against the totalitarian attack on art. Any attempt on our part to subordinate artistic tendencies as such to political interests could only compromise us in the eyes of true artists."

I believe that that is the substantially correct position that political people should take on art. I'm a political person and I do not claim to be an artist – although I suppose in a common, mundane sense we are all artists in the sense that we have a certain creativity which we express in certain ways; but, I am interested in uniting artists against capitalism as a socialist, as a revolutionary. If I am able to help them deepen their understanding of their own positions in society, to understand the problems of artistic expression, if I am able, but the primary task that I have as a spokesman, a person from a political movement, is to help overcome the differences within artists' circles, and to help them find their way to take a stand on the side of the revolution – freely of course, in their own way and in their own time.

I think that's our responsibility. But, Barry Lord comes into the political arena, and he starts to lay down the law, to every tendency, to every personality, demanding that you and I take value judgements on every artist in the history of Canada – every artist in the history of Canada. Well, he overlooks a few, of course. Some of them are notably absent, he should explain that *(laughter)*. But he covers many of them, and he makes pronouncements on them – on

their style, on their role – on their present, on their past, and on their future – he takes positions on them.

This is supposed to be a Marxist work, a work of a movement which is interested in the progressive development of art and the involvement of artists in the class struggle – because of course Barry Lord talks about the class struggle.

I have difficulty grasping (its extent), it's a complicated book – it takes on a big task, tries to give us a panoramic view of art in the history of Canada. From the beginning – it's an ambitious book – art, even from the Eskimo right through to the latest artists' groups in Canada – it's a bold, a large book; it's hard to come to grips with it. I am trying to think of how best this could be dealt with in a forum where people have not read the book in all probability.

Well my first reaction is that the title is most odd: “The history of painting in Canada,” and “Toward the people's art.” Well, there are books on “people's art.” Usually in art circles “people's art” means “folk art”, means “craft,” “handicraft art.” It means popular art, generally untrained art (made by) persons who have been deprived of the opportunity to study art techniques and art theory of other times and of other peoples. Untrained art – that's what it usually means (by the term) “people's art.” So it struck me as a misnomer from the point of view of a socialist attitude. We want art to be completely available to the people, of course, but what “the people's art” is, is another question – what is “the art of the people”?

It is hard to make out exactly what Barry Lord means by “Toward the people's art.” In general we have to say that people are deprived of art; they're not involved in art, in general – the people. Certainly the galleries that Barry Lord frequents aren't the common areas of acquaintance of the people of this city; although there are a considerable number of galleries in Canada (open) to the people of Canada – they're generally deprived of art. It is almost (to) counterposes it against “bourgeois art” which he comments about quite consistency in the book – about “bourgeois art.”. He says there's a “people's art” – an art that expresses the classicism of the people.

Now, of course, there is such a thing as bourgeois art. We have to say that art that prevails in this society is a product of bourgeois society – it expresses in general – in general one could say it's the expression of the historic interests of the bourgeoisie – art in general. That art stands on the cultural inheritance, the art of pre-bourgeois society. So there is bourgeois art but there is (also) art which is the accumulated acquisition of mankind, with the bourgeoisie putting their last stamp on the art of this period,

What is “the people's art”? It seems to me that with the socialist revolution, that people are going to take the art of the past, and they're going to put their stamp on it. But what are they able to do with it today? Well, it turns out that really, what Barry Lord is talking about, is an art which identifies with what he considers to be the people's cause.

That's what he means. And he puts a name to it: it's called, not “socialist realism” but “social realism.” “Social realism.” I don't know if you get the papers from Korea – you probably don't (*murmurs from the audience*). I don't know if you know much about art under

Stalin – the theory of “socialist realism.” Well, I have not seen the term “social realism” myself before; I thought it was a diminutive, a short form for “socialist realism” but no, it isn’t. As a matter of fact in the process of trying to read around the subject, I made a little investigation, and I learned what “social realism” is.

Really, it’s just “socialist realism.” Isn’t it ironical, that in modern-day capitalist society, in Canada of all countries, we have a partisan of “socialist realism.” There it is, as it is practiced in Korea. Perhaps you are familiar with it as it was practised under Stalin. And it’s still largely practised in the Soviet Union (*Soviet Russia –ed.*) It is an art that is established by diktat. It is an art that is developed to sing a hymn of praise to the regime; that’s its expression in the Soviet areas, that’s what its form has been.

When Krushchev, later, and earlier Stalin moved in against the co-called degenerate artists, his theoreticians, talked in terms of “socialist realism.” And this is what they meant – there’s a visual example (too) of what it meant. Sometimes photographs weren’t too accurate, depicting the role of leading personalities in the history of Soviet society, and there are some unfortunate photographs, of course one famous picture which shows Lenin, a very famous photograph holding his cap addressing a big audience, but the original photograph showed Trotsky waiting for his turn to take the podium, and socialist realism came along and painted out Trotsky. You got the visual scene in realistic terms, prettified terms, which met the demands of the regime.

That’s socialist realism. This example here of course is to depict – it’s got a little story with it – the respected leader comrade Kim Il Sung, addressing the general membership at a meeting (and another at a machine plant – “The respected and beloved leader among artists at the Korean art group in Japan.” They are all weeping and he is making statements on art. And here it is again: “The great revolutionary leader Kim Il Sung died in the inaugural party congress,” and it goes on and goes on about (how) the great Kim Il Sung knows everything, who is “the father, master, life” – I’m not exaggerating, that is how it was with Stalin too – its all here – this was socialist realism, it was art in the service of the bureaucracy, an art which suppressed the freedom of intellectual expression and freedom of experiment. It was art which was a political weapon, as Bergeron says, that’s what “socialist realism” is, art as a political weapon.

That’s what we really have in Barry Lord’s book. He calls it “social realism.” So I happened to look up the views of one of the artists who he upholds, and important artist in the history of Canada, who is an artist worth paying some attention to, namely Fred Taylor. Fred Taylor’s work is a major work which is depicted in a section on (him) in the latter part of this book – a whole section on Fred Taylor.

I just happened to glance through the copy I had of the *New Frontiers*, a book that was published by the Communist Party *Cultural Roots* at the time Fred Taylor was an active painter. At any rate, Fred Taylor came back from the Soviet Union at the time he wrote this first edition of *New Frontiers* in 1952 and he talked about what “socialist realism” and “social realism” was – well, they’re the same – but he says there is an important difference (...) “there is an important difference between ‘social realism’ and socialist realistic art.”

The art of the USSR (*Soviet Russia –ed.*) of course is art produced in a socialist country – that’s “socialist realism” – art which is produced in a country which is designated “socialist.” (...) It’s debatable whether you can call Soviet society “socialist” – I think not, but at any rate... “Social realist” is art which is (produced) in a “socialist” country, reflecting the “socialist” life in that country, now, and to come.

In the capitalist world, we may feel that we can only produce “social realism,” but I believe we may do more, we may even see ahead, and embody our thoughts in a language intelligible to our audience – to have the vision and to create the language – that’s the task of the socialist-minded artist in the capitalist countries. So “socialist realism” is just another term for “social realism” in this country where capitalism still prevails. It’s art as a political weapon.

So, in a sense we have to deal with the politics of Barry Lord. The politics of the CLM Editorial Board – they’re nationalists. The Socialist League (*see note 1 below –ed.*) considers nationalism, the new nationalism that I think most of us are aware of, can hardly help but be aware of in Canadian society, as an important component of the radicalization in this country, but we socialists are not nationalists – we are internationalists. It (Canadian nationalism) is part of the radicalization – and we’re not nationalists.

Lord is a nationalist, very clearly a nationalist, and this concept permeates his book. He is a nationalist with a little difference – (unlike) nationalists like (*the Toronto-based financier*) E.P. Taylor. He considers E.P. Taylor and all these people as sell-outs, compradors as he calls them in parts of the book; generally he calls them “sell-outs.” They’re not nationalists, that’s his attack on them, or if they’re nationalist, they’re not patriotic and they’re not – I would add – chauvinist, which Barry Lord is. Barry Lord calls himself (and) in the book continues to identify himself as a patriot, and the best definition you can put on a work of art is that it’s patriotic, and in my opinion, he is a **chauvinist**.

And that permeates the book. He is anti-foreign, he is anti – not US imperialism, that would be commendable – he’s that, but he’s more than that, he’s anti-American, anti- even the American working class which he does not even see as existing, doesn’t even present itself in the book, although he deals with America at great lengths in various parts of the book. But he only deals with **one aspect** of America; America of the ruling class, imperialist America. He doesn’t deal with anything about the American working class; as a matter of fact in the process of presenting the history of Canada as the CLM sees it, he dismisses the American working class root and branch.

He sees Canada as a colony, without a national bourgeoisie of any importance, but for whom for some strange reason they hope to find some alliance in the two-stage theory. They have accepted the two-stage theory developed by Mao Tse-tung Now I hope you don’t think I am drawing this into a book on art -- I’m really not, not at all, I’m absolutely innocent, I’m not dragging this in by the hair; it’s all through the book. As a matter of fact I never realized that the foremost art critic in the world is Mao Tse-tung (laughs from the audience). That’s who it is; his views on art are put forward as a guiding line for Canadian artists – Mao Tse-tung’s views.

I know Mao Tse-tung was a great destroyer of Chinese art – it’s true they brought over

this really splendid example of early Chinese art, of pre-working class China, but you know there was a whole period – in the so-called Cultural Revolution when Mao Tse-tung and his supporters called upon the students and radicals **to smash** the art of the past – that's what they did; they smashed thousands of the most valued treasures, the cultural inheritance of the Chinese people. But Mao Tse-tung is the political guide for all of us who want to know something about art – in the eyes of Barry Lord.

See he makes it his guide, because he draws it the very simple – for him obvious conclusion – that Canada is a colony. And, if Canada is a colony, well then it is justifiable to have something to say about art in the colonial world (*RD here searches for a quote from Mao Tse-tung*) (...) it's located just in the part where he starts to deal with contemporary art in Canada. Unfortunately, the book is very poorly indexed. I couldn't find most of the references to Trotsky, which are many in the book.

At any rate, Mao is here (*RD shuffles notes, and finally:*) In any case, Mao Tse-tung deals with art in the colonial world – and Mao Tse-tung made some pronouncements on what the criteria should be, for Marxists, for persons who want to be artists, who want to create something, who want to make a contribution to humankind. First, their art must be national – that's the first criteria that Mao Tse-tung prescribes. And of course the book, from stem to stern, is an attack against any concept of internationalism in art; (alleging) where all the most promising artists went wrong one after another in Canada, including Quebec, when they made a connection with somebody in France; when Fernand Léger came to Montreal and disoriented some people; when they went over – when the famous Québécois painter Borduas went wrong making contact with Breton; when he went to Paris, he was through. And of course when he went to the United States, that is the real cesspool which nobody can withstand – the alien pressures of international global imperialism in the United States – so (art) has to be national.

Then he gives a rather peculiar connotation to nationalism: as you go through the book, (you find) he means “national” in the most exclusive way. The subject has to be not only recognizable and of course its death on any kind of experimental work, or any kind of innovation or any kind of move in the direction of constructivism or abstract – plastique or any of these forms – (this art) has not only to be recognizable but it has to be rooted in a most visual way, with Canada, with Canada as such.

As a matter of fact, strange to say, he doesn't deal with any art almost that isn't – scenic; he weights the whole book -- he hardly deals with any kind of portraits, except for the previous earlier period, which is all we have of any French period, of course, of religious propaganda – pictures of priests and nuns and others who were part of the ritual of the church (...) But there's nothing for whole sections of the book except landscape paintings.

Not only does (Canadian art) have to be “national,” it has to be “scientific.” Now it's not too clear exactly what “scientific” is, or what it isn't. I would say generally it has to be simply and readily understood, it has to be related to life as it is; it cannot be speculative, it cannot be romantic – there's someone who knows the book (looking up the reference for me). It must be “national,” it must be “scientific,” and it must be “democratic.” Those are the three criteria. Thank you very much.

(What follows is a very rapid quotation from the book, with an explanation that no one was able to use the term “national art” because it was only after World War I that Mao Tse-tung was finally able to analyse the situation and arrive at a theory of peoples’ culture...) So we couldn’t draw out of our own cultural experience – nobody else but somebody over in China – a totally different culture of course – did so. *(Quoting Lord):* “In an essay ‘on new democracy’ written in 1943 in an article in the magazine *Chinese Culture*, Mao gave the most decisive description to date of this concept.” I don’t know what that ‘to date’ is in there for. “He used the term ‘new democratic’ for national liberation struggles after 1917 to distinguish it from the earlier bourgeois national struggles.”

We’re in the age of course according to Lenin of the proletarian revolution, and the national liberation struggle according to Lenin will transcend and establish the socialist revolution, which China did *(Mao’s Red Army took power in 1952 –ed.)* through a process of uninterrupted revolution, as you know. At any rate, Mao is still talking in this book about the national liberation struggle. *(The three criteria are then repeated –ed.)*

This is established by Barry Lord just like that, regardless of the fact that there is an advanced capitalist class in this country with a developed working-class movement organized along its own class lines in combat with its bourgeoisie; regardless of the fact that there is a political party of the workers in this country based on the unions – he (Lord) designates Canada as a “colony,” in the classic mould. And so Mao Tse-tung’s views can be applied. They’re exact. What are the criteria *(repeated once again)* – “national,” “scientific”—seeking truth from facts – “In painting this means realism” – just like that.

The “new democratic culture is opposed to idealistic metaphysics and mysticism – which in my opinion don’t cover the realm of artistic expression at all -- realism versus all the rest, of idealism (...) Then the other criteria is that it be “democratic” art – “of the working people, the vast majority of the population, and will gradually become understood and supported by them.” (...)

“This is not the art of one class only, but of all those classes in the colony, united in fighting imperialism, led by the working class” (...) At any rate, it’s an art that unites **all classes** in the colony, in Canada, united in fighting imperialism. That is the criteria that Lord has imposed on art in Canada. And he imposes it, although he has no political power, he imposes it intellectually and by his judgement in the process of the book.

It’s a little hard to do this, you know, in Canada – to find any art that meets any of these criteria. But he does – Barry Lord finds some art – he finds this chap Taylor. I thought Harold Town was on very good grounds when he commented on the art (of Taylor). I looked at it –I’m not an artist, but I’ve looked at paintings, and I have a few ideas of what are problems of perspective and creativity, and *(I think we should consider)* Harold Town’s comments about the book). He says “the entire book is bloated with overkill and under-praise. Masters such as Milne and Morrice are brushed aside.” Then he says “the brother of E.P. Taylor,” this is Fred Taylor, “a painter of pedestrian social documents” – as how Town characterizes them – “is praised even though Lord is forced by a vestigial good sense to equivocate ungraciously over

Taylor's fatal technical shortcomings in applying his craft for victory (*in the war*) and afterwards (...)"

As a matter of fact, if you look at the work that is held up as a creation of this art that is necessary, as a form of art in this country, I would have to say that unfortunately we Canadians are bankrupt; we have not met the test (*reaction from the audience*) – the art that he (Lord) holds up generally strikes you, and I don't say this to cast derogation against the artist, but it strikes you as art made by persons who are attempting to come to grips with many of the problems of our (society) and (those who) who made it, or didn't make it. I am looking at them, and I was astonished that they would be put in a book which contains some of the worthwhile art in Canada – I question that there is any really great art, but there is some worthwhile and important art in Canada – when I look at what he puts forward, as the way forward for Canadian art, I can say we have a long, long way to go, and that nobody has realized this criteria that he has imposed upon us by Mao Tse-tung.

When I looked at Miller Brittain's book, at Bill Brittain's paintings, I thought that Brittain, no doubt a person of great sincerity and high purpose, just can't paint – that's all. (...) If I painted it, I wouldn't show it to you, if this was the height of my ability. And then he has another series of panels by Miller Brittain that never came to be – a series of panels which (were to become) frescoes for a hospital in the Maritimes, and never came to be (...) they're really (not) more than sketches – they're really a pretty low standard.. Then when you come to another example, Jack Humphrey's painting of a sailor – it's a most sterile, à la Laura Knight (...) or Proctor, a most sterile, superficial prettification of a human being, a study of a seaman.

It's character, its merit, it seems to me – the merit of these paintings – could only be said is that they deal with something that Lord thinks is noble and heroic – he uses the word – heroic. For instance this is a portrait of a sailor who is involved in the war and of course Barry Lord thinks that the Second World war was a great liberatory struggle for democracy, and therefore it's a work of importance, a portrait of a young man who went to war. And then there is this serious study of workers coming out of a factory, and since Lord thinks that people are essential in a painting in all circumstances, and these are the best people of course (*laughter*), they're workers, they're fighters, and Barry Lord as a talented kid probably never worked in his life, is the greatest partisan of work, in this book – that's one of the great symbols (...) And there's another one by Fred Taylor which reminds me more or less of poster art. As a matter fact (...) Taylor thought of it as such – he tried to sell them, he tried to give them – eventually he did give them away – to one of the aircraft companies in whose factory he painted them – some astonishing works of art (...)

As Town points out, Lord is a little embarrassed by the technical problems he imposes. You have all these vigorous human beings, you see, only a couple of heads and no bodies here; it's difficult to explain this problem, and of course this man is a "realist" you see; it's not something that Matisse would do (or some of the modern, innovative painters would do); he's a realist and obviously can't visualize the problem.

But there is something even more odd about the paintings. He says, straight-faced, that (...) after he painted it, the CPR (Canadian Pacific Railway) officials – it's a great end the war

effort, of course – the CPR officials were displeased with the painting, because it showed men doing work that is supposed to be done by machines; and the feat with the tank is said to be a death-trap. Well you know, you look at it, and you have this painting of some men – five men – pulling one of these big tanks onto the tracks. Of course anyone knows that this is an impossible feat – five human beings hauling this gigantic tank onto its tracks – it's supposed to be “realist” you see, and of course that's permissible in the school of “socialist realism.” Anything's permissible as long as it serves its purpose.

Art as a weapon, as a tool, and this art was a tool, a hymn of praise and a recruiting poster for World War 2. The workers wouldn't go for it either, because they got their bellyful of doing the work – he was a little downcast because he couldn't sell it to the union – Lord attacks the union because the leader in that union was Bob Adolf, a well-known CP (communist), a man of considerable trade union experience, but they couldn't sell it because nobody wanted them because they were a dime-a-dozen war propaganda posters – that's what they were – and Taylor isn't even as good as some of the others.—as a matter of fact all these posters pointing the way forward in the spirit of Mao Tse-tung are at that level (...) Jack Humphrey's painting is a painting of workers at work, that's all it is (...) obviously of very limited purpose – it's war propaganda – in this case as Bergeron would say, it's art as a weapon. That's what it is. It lacks very much any artistic character (...).

So there are all kinds of problems with this book. Is it Marxist? Well, it is materialist, let us say that, that's important. But it's not Marxist, it's not dialectical, it's mechanistic; it's a caricature of Marxism and that's why I wanted to deal with this book in this way. Marxism has to defend itself from this book. In that way the book can be said that this book is a disaster, from the point of view of the history of Canadian art, because it pretends to be Marxist and it's a caricature of Marxism.

It's completely mechanistic in its approach. It is permeated with absurdities. Lord has broad experience in explaining paintings. And putting into words – which is not easy of course – what some artists (have expressed) in color, in contrast, in form (...) For instance, Emily Carr, who is really a great painter in my opinion. I share his opinion about Carr – really impressive painter. He describes her painting – it is embarrassing.

We can't defend this book. (...) One of her (Carr's) better paintings – it's a good painting, he picked a good one (I thought his other choices of paintings weren't very important). In the first painting he picked by Emily Carr, she was just translating what she saw, (and rendered) the exotic art of the BC Indians (...). But with the second painting, Emily Carr found herself -- she did many other paintings of course. The meaning is clear. These austere figures, totems – there are none in Ontario (...) these are simple, bold, austere figures, in the dock areas and fields. (Lord writes): “The meaning is clear: these austere figures show the dignity, their ability to fight back” (*amusement from the audience*) – that's what these (totems) show – “they stand as guardians on the dock, an identification of this village and warning to unfriendly visitors, the rage of the Native peoples at the destruction of their proud civilization can be sensed in the raised fist” (*laughter*) –you know the labor movement today, and the black movement use the raised fist – well the god they depicted in this totemic figure had a fist, and (Lord) sees it as “the determined expression (...) on the three carved faces” (... showing) “the might of the

Native people” and so on (RD here quotes an extensive interpretation of the painting in terms of Native culture and supposed resistance....)

The book is full of these attempts to translate this work – mostly utterly absurd attempts to interpret the meaning of this art. Like Lauren Harris’ famous painting, which I think is an important painting – I think it’s called ‘North Shore, Lake Superior’ – I think most of you know it (...) (Lord writes): “What a difference in Harris’ version – instead of a realistic force for change” – he is comparing it to Tom Thompson’s ‘West Wind’ – the wind is blowing in Thompson’s painting, which I thought is somewhat decorative and therefore a weak point in this work – that’s my personal opinion – (...) (Lord continues): “there is a cold, clear illumination of Harris’ transcendental life that bursts as if from the heavens” – well, he’s showing a break in the clouds, you see – it’s quite startling, and he (Lord) says that it’s “transcendental” and that Lawrence has gone off into some mystic outer-space, he’s left the earth. (...) “The (tree) stump – rather than being a sign of heroic endurance like the trees battling the winds around them, is a derelict victim of some lightening storm of the distant past...” (...) he goes on – I know its getting a little tedious...

But, this (*translation of the meaning of art*) is not untypical. (Its followed by a) shocking chapter on Benjamin West, who brought to Canada and the United States the techniques and the culture that was then prevalent in Europe, and he tried to paint using the skills and background from which he came – so he painted a romantic picture of Wolfe – like many paintings, its a composite (of history). So Barry Lord (did a lot of research) and he shows that some of the figures in the painting “were not there” – the circumstances were quite different. So (for Lord) this romantic painting, in which it is common that artists bring in other figures – (but for Lord) this is a terrible thing – “he is a crook. He was arrogant and he was vain” (...) – but this is supposed to be an artistic judgement, and we are being built up to accept his artistic judgement (..).

Well, he paints the conqueror, Wolfe. A little while later Benjamin West went down south and he painted the anti-imperialist Washington, in perhaps the most famous painting we know is by the same painter, who, when he painted Wolfe, is depicted as a scoundrel and schemer and a blackguard, a counter-revolutionary, whereas when he painted in the States later he became the foremost exponent of the portrait of the great American revolutionaries – their time and their circumstances.

(...) In another example on the same page, there are two portraits, who are by (Frederick) Varley, an important artist of some considerable skill. One is a portrait he made of Margaret Fairley, an activist in the Communist Party for many years (...) The other is a portrait of a young woman in B.C. – she’s just looking up – I don’t know what she’s thinking about – she may be thinking about the latest problems developing in the class on Marxist theory, she may be thinking about the Law of Value (*a few laughs*) At any rate, here’s Margaret Fairley, and she looks somewhat bored (...) I don’t know what she’s thinking about, but Barry Lord knows she’s a Marxist, so believe me, she’s thinking deep thoughts (*laughs from audience*). And Lord knows what the title is of the painting by Varley – it’s a mystical title, in honour of some Asiatic transcendental personality, and so he gives us an evaluation of these two paintings – utterly ludicrous evaluations (...) it’s not an evaluation of this painting as a work of art, it’s his

interpretation of the person, of what he knows about the person and his speculations on significance of it (...)

Okay, so there's a canonization of workers and work in the book, and in the search for a model for Canadian art, he gives primacy to the subject. As a matter of fact, this becomes the **only** criteria. (...) (Lord's) search for model gives primacy to the subject along the lines of three criteria of Mao Tse-tung.

The book is nationalistic and it is chauvinist. He attacks international art; he attacks exchanges of experiences artists must have with other artists, with other art centres and other cultures. He attacks this as dangerous. I guess (he thinks) the best way to develop Canadian art would be by complete isolation from all other art. And some of the persons he presents as the avant-garde are not, in any significant way⁶, by no means the important artists, and some of the artists he most belittles are some of the most important. He doesn't have an artistic criteria, and he has this "art as a weapon" criteria theory of "social realism" from Stalin and Mao Tse-tung.

Now I just want to say a few words about the attacks on Trotsky, because they are not irrelevant – they are attacks on international art – first, they're slanderous (because) he doesn't know anything about Trotsky's views on art. I doubt if he's ever opened a book of Trotsky's; and they are complete slanders of the artists with whom he associates, or those artists to whom he associates with Trotsky. He makes the attack, and then he pulls back – discreditable attacks on various artists.

He says "Trotsky's identification with surrealism is completely in character" (...) Trotsky was an agent of fascism, he (makes out that) Trotsky was anti-Soviet, anti-socialist – an individualist – he repeats all of these things. But after these 38 lines of slander against Breton (...) because Breton has some association with Trotsky and the character of Trotsky is defined (...) Trotsky was interested in collaborating with all artists in combating totalitarianism in art, and of course Breton had been the leading member of the Communist Party, a leading intellectual in the Surrealist school. After 38 lines of slander, which is (also) directed against (*Quebec radical painter Claude-Emile*) Borduas (...) who may or may not have been aware of Breton's collaboration with Trotsky – but he's done Borduas in.

(...) I notice that he does not give a picture of who Borduas was. Claude-Emile Borduas was a revolutionary, a real and genuine revolutionary in the world of art. I went to the trouble of getting some of Borduas's views, which Canadians should know about. Borduas comes out of the Quebec revolution – that's where he comes from. It's not unexpected that the most revolutionary artist would find expression in Quebec. In 1948 he published a declaration called "*Un refus global*" which is a total rejection – a total rejection – it's a condemnation of society today – he's attacked for this by Barry Lord because he doesn't take up the unique aspect in the social order, the role of **American?** imperialism.

He attacks capitalism and imperialism root and branch – for this he is condemned by Barry Lord. I assume you've read *Refus globale* which attacks American imperialism – as a matter of fact he does mention in passing in a contradictory way that Borduas participated in the Asbestos strike and he had many vanguard elements around him. But he had fourteen persons

sign his *Refus globale*: “a colony which in 1760 was thrust from the walls of fear, the habitual refuge of the vanquished, a small people springing from a colony that was (...), isolated, defenceless, beaten, against invasions; but consciousness is awakened by the light-giving touch of the maligned facts; men who are not monsters and who dare to express loud and clear that the most unhappy among us (.....) in shame of our being and in fear of being swallowed alive (...) in Christian decadence (...) refusing to be less than we can be; refusing to be silent. Make of us what you will but you must understand that there is a place for magic and for love against global rejection. We are posing total responsibility. The recurrent buffeting of the past has resulted in the massive slaughter of present and future. In encouragement or in persecution we shall cheerfully pursue the satisfaction of our desperate need to be set free.”

Of course he was fired from his job at that time. He made another statement: “Together we want to take the extravagance of living under a sharpened conscience and open honesty and we will see what happens. The worst can only be catastrophe, which is better than a false success (...) those who claim their right to worthwhile toil (in place of) sterile drudgery. They will rebuild a society in which they can move about without shame and think without fetters.” Very profound – I just gave you a little bit of this profoundly revolutionary declaration that swept through the artistic circles of Quebec – and Barry Lord ridicules it – page after page, that the declaration was mimeographed, in bad form, that it was tattered and dog-eared as it was circulated around; of course it appeared in the preliminary stages of the Quebec revolution, but the Quebec revolutionaries around him, (Jean-Paul) Riopelle and others, identified themselves with the Quebec revolutionary struggles – and this man, Barry Lord, denounces him because he was associated with Breton, and as art took on other forms, away from “social realism.” It took on certain abstract characteristics of an experimental character, and so his revolutionary will, his revolutionary identity, is denied.

And this is not unusual in other parts of this essay. Now I’d like to (...) say a few words about the general attitude of Marxists to art. I think the first thing I want to establish is, that Marxists don’t publish edicts and don’t lay down rules, like Barry Lord does, to all the various currents in artistic circles. Marxism sees art as propaganda, yes, art as expressing ideas in society, yes. All the great art is in essence, it could be called propaganda, but there is propaganda and there is propaganda. Part of that shift is one thing, part of that shift is not inconsistent with objectivity in proceeding from re-creating reality, but propaganda that is idealistic glorification and distortion – that’s another matter. And that’s what Barry Lord puts forward as propaganda. Propaganda as a simplistic message (...) is superficial and irrelevant in many ways (...)

As Marxists we think art should be related to life. It seems to me that art that is not capable of visualization, art that is non-objective, suffers – is weaker – this is the opinion of Marxists, although we’re not against this type of art – we’re not opposed to experimentation – we’re not opposed to research in an attempt to find new forms of expression.

Rivera did both, Diego Rivera who I think is the best exponent of revolutionary art. Rivera in his younger days went to Paris, and he painted as a cubist. He moved from the cubist circles. But then he went back to Mexico and he applied some of those experimental ideas with the help of some of the most sophisticated circles, I get the impression. I remember some of the dramatic paintings he did in New York where he showed the workers in motion, where he related

the motion of workers who were drilling, when they were taking out the drill, he showed in a dynamic way the connections in their motions; he did experimental things at this time.

He also developed an inventive feeling for the people of Mexico and their revolutionary traditions, and the art of the meaning and significance of the October Revolution which in my opinion finds its highest expression in the paintings of Diego Rivera. He is the greatest partisan of the (Russian) Revolution. His paintings are very political – there's no question about that – but they're also works of great organization, a great spatial arrangement. The characters in them are vivid and real and vital – they're not caricatures, they're not idealized in the sense of being removed from life. The paintings (*massive interior murals & frescoes –ed.*) themselves are incredible works of organization and spatial arrangement. On one whole wall there is a panorama of the history of the class struggle in Mexico, or in another he will give you a whole picture of the struggle of the miners in many phases from the time they are being stripped to ensure they don't take gold out of the mine, to their going down into the pit, when the bodies of other miners are being brought out – you get a great panorama of this. But they are great works of integrated (scenes) – of great color, of great dynamism.

Yes, we think that art has to stand on the past; has to stand on the traditions of the past. And an artist who is serious has to depend on all the technology, all the information he can accumulate, the cultural accumulation of his craft. But of course there are new artistic needs. And one of the artists that Barry Lord deals with here, attempts to relate his art to new artistic needs. One of them is Jack Chambers who attempts to integrate some of the innovations that he came across in the realm of photography. In my own opinion he (is not) successful but it comes across as an important experimental effort.

And then of course there is another experimental painter, whose work becomes part of the cover, a fellow by the name of Boyle, who attempts to move off the canvas, which is a radical concept, and develop a structure – you can't see it here, only one of the panels (...) it's a structure, composed of different phases in which he attempts to give a rounded picture, and its sort of a mobile, a little mechanical I thought in some parts of it, an attempt to move into a new area, and to meet some new challenges and to give paintings-in-the-round.

Yes even futurism and Dada was not irrelevant – it expressed a confusion of arts, a dead-end of a period following World War 1, the crisis of world capitalism. But it contained certain innovations which were unusual, unuseful, in a sense the protest of the “beats” which for many young people was a part of the process of their radicalization, and their coming to socialism.

But art has its own laws. As against Barry Lord's projection of Mao Tse-tung's laws, we would say that a work has to be looked at as a work of art. Some time ago I came across an expression used fairly commonly – “Art without epoch” – I don't think it is so good a term, but there is such a thing as “art that transcends an epoch” – that goes further than an epoch – how else could we appreciate Michelangelo's David, which had great revolutionary significance for their time. How else could we appreciate much of the written work of Shakespeare and others – this work that transcends its epoch – but it has to conform to certain accumulated knowledge of art.

That's why we would not take a position on various tendencies and various currents. But art must be alive, and I will just bring one example of how Trotsky (saw it) "in the psychology of sex and (...) about love, there lies a complex system of psychological transmitting mechanisms in which there are individual racial and social elements. The racial foundation, that is the sexual basis of man, changes slowly; the social forms of love change more rapidly. They produce new shadings and information, new spiritual demands and use a new vocabulary, and so they present new demands on poetry..."

The other day I happened to pick up a copy of *Ms (magazine)*. I wanted to get it because it was a special issue dealing with the International Women's Year. There was a very interesting art section. At first it startled me -- as a male -- but it seemed to me highly relevant -- what do we think women's liberation is going to do to art? The concept of sexuality; the concept of woman's place in society. I think it (the women's movement) has a great deal to do, a great deal to contribute to art. The insert (...) was a series of paintings by women, of men, men not as a sexual object but as a sensual experience and relationship.

I thought that was relevant to art, and dealing with some of the new problems that confront art. So for Marxism, art, within the revolution, as Fidel said, **everything**; against the revolution, **nothing**. That's how Fidel explained the role of art in Cuba. For revolutionaries in Canada, we would hope that artists would identify themselves with the struggles of the working class, with the struggles for socialism, and find methods of expressing this with some subtlety, with some understanding of the complexities of the problem, in some meaningful way. And we would hope that they would paint that way, but they could participate in the socialist movement in an active way also.

(applause)

Further comments and contributions from the floor:

What follows is Ross Dowson's further critique of Lord's pedantic political approach to the problem of art, and his mechanical misrepresentation of the Marxist traditional views on art.

Zane Boyd speaks from the floor on the fundamental impulse of art being independent from politics.

Another speaker compares experimental art as a form of social protest, albeit oblique.

A third speaker from the audience deplores popular art forms such as movies which reflect death and destruction; and stated that all art is unavoidably political. What about your observation of a renaissance in art taking place in Canada? he asks.

Dowson adds that "a serious artist would pick up on new themes with new art forms. Lord finds Picasso's 'Guernica' as meaningless yet it is one of the most famous and evocative works today. (...) Picasso remains very popular among unsophisticated people (as well...) Art should do more than reflect; it should analyze and add to our understanding (...) I'm expressing my desires and wishes in art; I don't want to impose on others' choices (...) We're 'letting all flowers bloom.'"

A woman in audience speaks, mentioning Michaelangelo. Another woman speaks on the commercialization of art under capitalism.

Final wrap-up by Ross on the commercialization of art; on the "renaissance" he notes in various arts in Canada and growing social awareness of the arts (public fairs and displays) all

while the system itself is becoming more destructive of art.
(end of cassette recording)

Notes: 1. *Socialist League: Ross Dowson was a leading member of the SL from 1974 and the Forward Group from 1978 until his illness in 1989.*